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CONCERNING A NEW IMMORTAL

BY WILLIAM H. SCHEIFLEY

ROBERT DE FLERS, president of the Society of Dramatic Authors, has just been officially received into the French Academy. His election last year as successor to the Marquis de Ségur met with general approval, especially in Paris, where he has been the most popular playwright since the death of his father-in-law, Sardou. Although at present the Immortals can boast of several dramatists whose works are likely to survive those of de Flers, yet it is he, rather than they, who represents the Marivaux tradition, already established in the Academy by de Musset, Scribe, Sardou, Meilhac and Halévy.

Born in 1872 near Caen in Normandy, Robert de Flers was early ambitious to become a historian. At the age of fifteen, while attending the *lycée*, he met Armand de Caillavet, who cherished the same desire. In due time, both gave up history for drama, each trying at first to carve his fortune for himself. While de Caillavet was composing *revues* for the theatre of the Eiffel Tower, and farces for the Palais Royal, de Flers practised journalism and story-writing. As each found the advice of the other indispensable, they began active collaboration for the stage in 1901, joining forces in composing *The Labors of Hercules*, a burlesque that proved an uproarious success. This was followed by a sprightly comedy, *The Paths of Virtue*. Thereafter, until the opening of the war, they brought out every season one or more fresh pieces. Reviving the best traditions of the French drama, their plays triumphed throughout Europe and in the chief cities of the New World.

This happy partnership, interrupted by the great conflict, came to an end with the death of de Caillavet in 1915. Although de Flers has recently united with another dramatist, Francis de Croisset, it seems fitting to treat him and his original collaborator as one playwright. Owing, indeed, to the similarity of their

temperaments, it would be idle to speculate as to the particular contribution of each. Their tastes, feelings, judgments, and modes of expression were identical. Work in common was easy for them, and de Caillavet used to declare that neither could be sure which part of a play was his own. In a give-and-take spirit they would talk over a plot, each at first defending or rejecting an idea, perhaps eventually to favor the opposite. Certainly no two men of letters—be it the Goncourts, Meilhac and Halévy, the Marguerittes, the Rosnys, or the Tharauds—were ever more affectionately attached or thought more naturally as one mind. It will suffice, therefore, to speak here of the survivor alone.

With de Flers it has always been a principle to give theatre-goers what they like. As a rule, the public seeks entertainment in the theatre. Nothing better affords this than what may be termed *genre* comedy. During the vogue of the *comédie rosse*, such *comédie de genre* was diverted somewhat from its true course. But, thanks to de Flers and others, it has returned to its proper province. To this *théâtre de madame*, as it is also called, belong nearly all the score or more of de Flers plays, the only exceptions being his three political satires. In these, however, he touches the shortcomings of French society with gloved hands. His is not the mordant satire of Beaumarchais or the blunt assault of Augier and Dumas *filis*.

In the "pleasant plays" the art of de Flers is perfection. Their gaiety is tempered by sentiment. They end happily after providing not only an agreeable picture of life but some useful maxim duly exemplified. They are all "well-made." In technique, indeed, de Flers excels. He is as supple and resourceful as Scribe or Sardou. He eliminates everything likely to shock and irritate, and he includes whatever will gratify. He reacts against the *pièce mal faite*, itself a reaction from the *pièce bien faite*. He banks upon cleverness and wit. "What heresy to condemn wit in Paris!" exclaims M. Doumic. "The dialogue of a *comédie de genre* should scintillate with epigrams; as for de Flers, he fills each of his pieces with enough for two."

Laughter and tears are conjoined by de Flers in his comedies of sentiment. Now one, now the other predominates. In *Papa*, pathos prevails. This is a Daudet-like story of a natural

son legitimatized against his will by his father, to whom he yields his sweetheart. In *Miquette and her Mother*, gaiety holds sway, and the humble heroine not only wins a count for a husband, but arranges for the marriage of her widowed mother—a provincial shop-keeper—to his uncle, a marquis. Improbable as is the double wedding, de Flers, by his verve, makes it credible. Mirth is to the fore, also, in *The Fan*. A modern Célimène, whose fan symbolizes the power of the coquette, has temporarily ceased immolating her victims upon that weapon. Having broken it, as a vanquished general breaks his sword, Giselle for the moment leads wayward men back to the path of virtue, finally even accepting the hand of her jilted lover. But he, poor fellow, must learn that a coquette will sooner or later replace her broken fan,—sooner rather than later.

Best among de Flers's "pleasant plays" is *Love Watches*. Here a young wife resolves, like Dumas's Francillon, to punish her unfaithful husband in kind, but at the critical moment loses courage. To what does Jacqueline owe her salvation? According to the marquise, "There is but one thing that can keep a woman to the true path; and that is education." From such a view the curé naturally dissents, declaring that more important than education is religion. Both are wrong, affirms Jacqueline's uncle, who awards the palm to love. "A woman can be preserved only by love,—not the love which she inspires, but that which she feels. Let diamond cut diamond. Love alone is sufficiently strong to defend us against love." It is love, then, that is the source of Jacqueline's virtue. This comedy is a delightful mixture of sentimentality and drollery, of observation and imagination. It is swift and lively, replete with smart sayings, beautifully constructed, and altogether charming. If its situations and characters are not original, they are nevertheless so deftly combined as to render the play a favorite in every European capital and in America.

Scarcely less remarkable has been the vogue of de Flers's political pieces. In *The King* he satirizes the infatuation of democratic France for princes, depicting with brilliant burlesque the visit of the sovereign of a petty state to republican Paris. The citizens fall at his Majesty's feet; even Socialist deputies

bleat "Sire!" content to surrender to the noble monarch their wives and sweethearts. Here the bourgeois Socialist has succeeded the bourgeois *gentilhomme* of old; M. Bourdier has replaced the immortal M. Jourdain; and Mme. de Pompadour is resuscitated. Little wonder that this play was hailed by French critics as the most impertinent and gaily corrosive satire upon French manners witnessed for many a year.

Equally amusing is *The Green Coat*, which pokes fun at the French Academy, and incidentally, also, at a parvenue American duchess, who talks the most absurd French jargon and compromises her husband's honor. Throughout, comedy tends to lapse into farce, and echoes may be heard from *Les Précieuses ridicules* and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. The result is so grotesque as to leave the Immortals unscathed; yet there is excellent foolery here in the vein of Bernard Shaw. Thus, when the Royalist duke pays a visit to the President of the French Republic, he notices a beautiful bust, and asks what it represents. "That is the Republic," answers the President. "I don't know her," responds the Duke, "but she's not so ugly. Is this a good likeness?" The President concedes that the likeness is a bit more youthful than the original. Then the Duke points out a crack that may widen. "No doubt," says the President, "but I have consulted a specialist, and there's nothing to fear for seven years,"—an allusion to the length of the presidential term in France. Best of all is the *discours de réception*, a jocular parody upon the usual Academic address. Whatever the fate of the play as a whole, this scene will endure; even Molière has scarcely surpassed it.

During the six years following 1914, de Flers composed no plays. He had lost his faithful collaborator, and he was engaged in military service, being cited for bravery in action and awarded the Croix de Guerre. For part of the time he was attached to the French legation in Roumania, and after the Armistice he served as *chargé d'affaires* in Bucharest. In 1919, from April to August, he waged a newspaper campaign in favor of according greater freedom in the determination of world politics to the smaller nations, especially to Serbia, Poland, Greece, Hungary, and Roumania. His various articles on this subject he has

recently collected in a volume called *The Little Table*, a title derived from the practice of putting children to eat at a little table while their elders are dining at a large one. Here, through de Flers, the smaller nations protest against being set apart from the big nations and demand admission to their counsels.

De Flers of late has been occupied, also, with his labors as associate editor of the *Figaro*. He has written, with Francis de Croisset, a drama, *The Return*, produced last October at the Athénée. Even now he is preparing for the Société des Conférences a series of lectures dealing with his brilliant predecessors in the field of comedy, Meilhac and Halévy. It is to *The Return* that we naturally look for evidence of dramatic powers developed by the great conflict. The story is of a diplomat whose three years of wedlock before 1914 have been unhappy. He is too cold and methodical to please his wife. She, yearning for tenderness and gaiety, would leave him, but the war supervenes. Jacques, as a captain of infantry, becomes for Colette a hero, the more admired when distant in the East. On his return after the Armistice, Colette and her mother embrace him, though disappointed to find him in mufti. To their questions about the war he retorts, "Oh, I beg you,—my slippers and a bath." Within a few months husband and wife are at odds again, and Colette, piqued by his devotion to work, asks him for a divorce. Then Jacques, awakening to his folly, and resolved upon the reconquest of his wife, adopts an ingenious expedient. Pretending to consent to their separation, he asks only to look for his own successor. Until this successor can be found, the household in appearance will remain the same. His mother-in-law is satisfied, as she anticipates a fashionable success that winter.

So the quest of a new husband begins. As for Colette, she takes little interest in it until a former admirer introduces his cousin Marcel, a dashing officer, with whom she falls in love. In jealousy the husband forgets his rôle and grows threatening, and Colette returns to her mother. But a reconciliation is soon effected. The rivals for Colette discover that they have fought side by side in the same sector as brothers in arms. So Marcel will surrender the lady to her husband. She weeps at this loss of her lover, but it chances that a letter, written by Jacques in the

East a year earlier, makes its belated appearance and reveals to her his deep-seated tenderness. As she listens to the reading of this confession of his love penned at a moment when he felt himself in mortal danger, their tears mingle, and they embrace. Thus, thanks to the French Burleson, a married couple is transformed into a pair of lovers, and a household in danger of dissolution is saved.

It is evident that the World War has wrought in Robert de Flers no absolute change. The conflict seems chiefly to have developed his emotional faculties. Like Daudet after 1870, he reveals a larger sensibility, a sympathy more tender, and at times an indulgent pity—qualities which serve to temper his sparkling *esprit*. Yet, *esprit* he possesses in abundance. Nor does his inventive resourcefulness show signs of diminution. Though continuing to hover upon the verge of the *risqué*, he resists the temptation to indulge in pornographic comedy. If, as *The Return* seems to indicate, the war has given him an outlook more serious, we need not fear that he will lose his proverbial *sourire de Paris*. He is not a reformer with a mission. He is a humorist, successful in the use of Shavian banter and paradox, but much more of an artist than Shaw. Unlike the witty Irishman, he respects the virtues of form, and exhibits a mastery of natural dialogue and an acute insight into human motives. Indeed, as a psychologist of love he ranks not far below Capus, Bataille, Porto-Riche, and de Curel.

Whatever his future achievements, it must be admitted that no other dramatist of his generation—not even Sacha Guitry, Courteline, or Tristan Bernard—has provided for theatre-goers so many delightful evenings. For their enjoyment he has composed pieces smart and debonnaire, not so moral as to bore, nor yet so immoral as to offend. Delighting in fantasy, his plays avoid the vulgar and the cynical. They reveal no trace of the brutality and bitterness of naturalism. Indeed, de Flers is the first since Labiche to titillate so agreeably the emotions of his audience, “relieving laughter with April tears, and tears with April sunshine.”

WILLIAM H. SCHEIFLEY.